



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE ENGLISH JOURNAL

VOLUME IV

MAY 1915

NUMBER 5

A CREATIVE APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

FRANK W. CHANDLER
University of Cincinnati

Whoever would study literature must come directly into touch with it. A statement so obvious might seem unnecessary; yet teachers are still prone to substitute for acquaintance with literature itself a knowledge of the facts about literature. Courses in literary history are an essential part of the college curriculum, but such courses, unless they are pursued by those who have already acquired some feeling for and understanding of literature, are stultifying. It is doubtless the business of our colleges and universities to teach literary scholarship; but it is even more imperatively the business of our schools to teach literary appreciation.

How shall the pupil be made to realize the virtue of literature as art? How shall he be taught to feel and to interpret a lyric, a novel, a play? These are the vital questions for the school teacher to answer, not merely, How shall the pupil be made to master certain facts regarding certain authors—their dates, lives, works, environments, and sources?

The need for teaching literary appreciation in the schools is beginning to be generally recognized, although university-bred instructors to some extent still insist on foisting upon their unhappy high-school charges the methods of university scholarship. The need for teaching literary appreciation to the Freshman entering college is less often admitted. It is assumed that he already knows how to read worthy works of the imagination with some intellectual

and aesthetic response. Perhaps this assumption may be a safe one a dozen years hence when the schools have buckled down to their proper task with singleness of purpose. At present, however, the assumption is without warrant, and what most Freshmen and some Sophomores require is not a historical survey of English literature, but, as a preliminary, a course in literary appreciation. At the University of Cincinnati I have been attempting to conduct such a course, and the experiment has been fraught with interest.

In this course, I lay no stress upon literary history. Instead, I assign for study examples of various types of literature—ballad, lyric, descriptive poem, short and long verse-narrative, essay, and drama—without dogmatizing much on the distinctions of the forms. I begin with ballads and lyrics because they are the kinds of poem most easily read and understood. Certain students on one day give me oral and written reports on what they have read; and then, at the next recitation, they show me how far they have been able to enter into the spirit of an assigned poem by endeavoring to express that spirit in verses of their own. Thus critical interpretation and appreciative creation complement each other. At first the attempts in both directions are very crude, but in a short period surprisingly good results follow. In the meantime, during the class exercises, I usually read aloud the poems under consideration and set the students to discussing them as to meanings, meters, diction, and artistic effects. Next, I read aloud a class criticism, and then a class poem in the same vein, and call for comments on both. I give no set lectures because I believe that the social group should do the work, not the teacher.

At the start, student criticisms are often lamentably meager and inaccurate. Thus, on one assignment, several naïve Freshmen write impromptu reports as follows:

"Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam tells about a man who was thinking all the time that he had to die because everyone before him had died and he knew that everyone would die, so he knew he would fall in line with the rest and die."

"*Omar Khayyam* is a poem on the same order as *Rubaiyat*. It says to enjoy while you may and leave the rest to chance."

"*Rubaiyat* tells of a man who is sitting in a garden talking to his sweetheart. The poem expresses the opinions of the man."

"This is a eulogy on life told by a skeptic. It is a very peculiar poem and hard to understand."

Pupils who can say no more than this about Fitzgerald's version of Omar are evidently in crying need of a course to develop their literary perceptions. I am therefore not discouraged, nor do I discourage them. Very soon they learn that what is required is a much more searching analysis, and they proceed to make it. I demand in such work that they set down their own reactions without reference to the stock criticism of experts, and, above all, without attempting to truckle to my opinions and preferences. In two or three months this is the sort of fresh and original criticism that a fearless youth will give of a work like Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi," before we have discussed it in class. The criticism is funny, of course, because inadequate, yet valuable because real:

Before writing about Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi," I must first state my estimate of Browning as a poet. To begin with, I do not appreciate his works. For the most part they require too much exertion on the part of the reader to draw out the meaning. A real poet is clear, concise, and to the point. I have worked over some of the lines of Browning for five minutes at a time and yet got only a hazy idea of their meaning. It is not because of my inability to understand English poetry that I fail to comprehend what he is driving at, because I can understand Tennyson or Shakespeare, if not at the first reading, at the second. Browning's lack of clearness and attempts at the profound, which are only muddy and not deep, were always a source of worry to me, for I came to the conclusion that it was my soggy and unable thinking. However, I have partly, if not completely, taken the blame off of myself by discovering that he had negro blood in his make-up. I have often come into contact with members of this emotional race, and their conversation consists of long, meaningless words and indistinct allusions. I see these characteristics in Browning's works every time I try to read them. When Browning, however, attempts to work with the simpler things he does show some ability. This is instanced in his reference to the boy drawing in his song book, in this monologue, and to the relating of the simple incident of "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" and the equally simple "Incident of the French Camp." Nevertheless, his poems are not worth the digging required to get out the pithy lines.

"Fra Lippo Lippi" tells the story of a monk who advocates realistic painting at the end of the Dark Ages. This very theme strikes me as useless, as all the artists have long ago decided that that was the correct method, and no one now disputes the point. It is like two old soldiers fighting out the Civil War; it is a settled issue and no one cares. The monk in the poem tells how he was tired of life at an early age and is persuaded by another monk to renounce lands and riches, which he never had, to become a monk. After a while he becomes a painter who does the conventional decorating in the churches, but in his own studio he departs from the stiff and set models of art and paints

nature as he sees it. He tells the whole story himself, picturing himself to be caught by guards as he is trying to escape from a palace where he has been set to do some conventional work against his will. He addresses his story to the guards, who make no replies but patiently listen to him. This poem is an excellent example of an overestimated poet overestimating a theme and getting away with it before the world; and smugly I see him smile behind a screen of unmerited praise.

Such a criticism is worth while and welcome, although others in the class bend their energies to convince the Freshman who wrote it that his failure to get anything out of "Fra Lippo Lippi" is not Browning's fault but his own. To this end, I myself recite much of the monologue aloud, interrupting my reading now and then with a rapid fire of questions as to the meanings of various lines and phrases and as to the way in which these should be rendered. From this exercise, which may well consume a whole period, we emerge refreshed and stimulated, and even my doubting Thomas is prepared thereafter to find in Browning what he had so largely missed there before.

But it is not so much upon the discussion and prepared criticisms of the poems assigned that I rely for the success of my labors in teaching literary appreciation; it is rather upon the original composition of the students. It is their creative approach to literature that makes them really feel it. While, for example, one set is preparing a prose review of Omar's *Rubaiyat*, as I have indicated, another set is preparing to reproduce in verse of their own the same measures, moods, and ideas. It is my experience that in the effort to catch the spirit and lilt of Omar by trying to write in his style, this second set invariably gains more in the way of actual understanding than do those who merely write an essay about Omar. Here, for example, are a few quatrains done thus to order by a Freshman and evincing a degree of appreciation scarcely to be displayed or tested by any prose analysis:

Oh fill the cup and snatch the blooming rose,
Nor vainly seek to learn what no one knows—
Look how each brooding questioner in turn
Like desert sand into the Nowhere blows.

Lo! every blade of grass that upward springs
Could tell of long-forgotten buried kings;
And myriads that drew the breath of life
Have lived and died where now the cricket sings.

For other souls before thee trod this way
And prattled of a life beyond the clay;
And they believed and wove a foolish dream—
Ah, they believed—but tell me—where are they?

Then drain the cup and let the morrow be,
Tomorrow's light may never dawn for thee;
And if thy place be empty 'neath the vine,
Who of the passing throng will care or see?

Practically, this method has the sanction of writers like Johnson, Franklin, and Stevenson, who employed it diligently to cultivate their own mastery of prose. Philosophically, it has the sanction of the great Italian aesthetician Benedetto Croce, who maintains that art is expression and that expression and subject-matter are not twofold, but single, and that the critic of poetry in order to appreciate must become for the moment a poet. As I read, there is awakened in me something of the same emotion and thought that first united in the poet to produce his work, and so in my consciousness, I live it over, I reproduce it. Only by such reproduction or expression, indeed, can I appreciate art, and my ability to reproduce imaginatively the work of others quickens both my sensitiveness to that work and my capacity for beautiful expressions of my own.

Accepting such a theory for what it is worth, I ask my Freshmen and Sophomores to read and then to write ballads, dramatic monologues, sonnets, Spenserian stanzas, heroic couplets, nature lyrics, lyrics of love, of patriotism, of religious feeling, elegies in country churchyards, and what not, believing that the creative approach to literature is the most natural as it is certainly the most joyous. A student who has read Shelley's "Indian Serenade" is told to write a "Song of the Serenader" and presents these verses, which I read aloud to the class and criticize, changing only one line at the suggestion of another student:

Oh! summer night-wind, blow the trees,
Set them singing low,
Whispering sweet in my lady's ear,
I love—I love her so.

Ah! little night-birds, sweetly call,
Tenderly tell my quest,
Tell her I wait 'neath her window here,
To clasp her to my breast.

Oh! soul of the summer night, oh! soul
 Cry out through the gloom above,
 That the Rose of her Heart may bloom tonight
 Into a perfect Love!

One who has read Cowper's couplets "On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture Out of Norfolk" is bidden, with others, to write in the same meter and mood a reminiscent poem in simple diction binding the thought about some definite object connected with the past. As a result, I receive, at the next class meeting, verses entitled "A Little Crutch"—not very poetical perhaps, but sincere:

Within my hands I hold a tiny crutch;
 I clasp it to my breast with reverent touch,
 This cause of all my infant griefs and tears;
 Ah! Memory of my blighted childhood years.

I see a long and sunny smiling street;
 I hear the scampering of little feet
 That played at racing games the whole day through;
 Ah! how I longed to run and play them too.

Each morning when I hobbled out to play,
 A crippled mite, yet striving to be gay,
 I begged my comrades for a quiet game;
 But jumping, skipping, racing was their aim.

So left alone, my smile would flit away
 And on my brow a furrow came to stay,
 For ponder as I would, I could not see
 Why crippled were my limbs while theirs were free.

The honesty of this effort is vouched for in the note appended by the author, who writes, "If criticized in class, please do not disclose my identity, as this is a bit too personal."

Another student after hearing a discussion of a group of religious lyrics, is struck by the charm of William Blake, and writes for me at command a Blakish thing entitled "Quest":

I sought my God
 In my fear of the to-be
 That, childlike, I had yearned to see;
 Eternity called out to me;
 I sought my God.

I made my God
 Of my love and dreams and tears,
 Of the mists of after-years,
 Of the faith that cheers, thro' doubts and fears;
 I made my God.

I found my God
In a sweet, celestial fire,
In the flames of young desire
Still higher, higher to aspire;
I found my God.

Another Freshman, after we have studied in several pieces the characteristics of *vers de société*, writes in the Austin Dobson vein of "My Lady's Handkerchief":

A tiny square of finest lace,
A cobweb merely,
And yet it means a world to me,
Who loved you dearly.
A fairy fragrance rises from it,
Memories bringing
Of glad May-morning promenades
And birds a-singing.
Of happy hours in blooming spring
When wandering over
The dewy lawns we drank the breath
Of purpling clover.
Your hair gleamed, shining at my side
Like sparkling water,
And you, a wood sprite, sped along—
Diana's daughter.
That day you gambled for my heart,
You precious sinner!
And now I'm left alone to mourn
For you, the winner.

When the class, after discussing the traits of the dramatic monologue, bends its energies to produce monologues of its own, I am handed this adaptation of Tennyson's "Northern Farmer, New Style," entitled "The Modern Farmer":

Are you going to market, my woman? If so, let me give you a lift,
It is hard to carry the baskets, though your load shows an uncommon
thrif.
No, I won't break your eggs—you can set them right down on the
floor of the car;
My machine goes like wind—don't be scared, ma'am—to me it is better
by far
If I smash a speed limit or two, it's the fun of the thing that I like,
Not for me is the horse and the rickety cart and the sandy old pike; . . .

So the verse runs on for a hundred lines as the up-to-date farmer, in his prattle to his passenger, reveals his philosophy of life and incidentally his character.

In considering a group of nature poems, I point out various ways in which poets deal with nature, and set the class to experimenting with each. As an example of the interpretative treatment of a natural object with which the poet has identified himself, as did Shelley with the cloud, one student speaks for "The Spring Violet" as follows:

Within my close-shut heart I heard the voice
Of fragrant Spring-time; over hill and plain
Echoed its mellow, clear "Awake! rejoice!
Spring comes again!"

My soul was filled with lilting song of bird
And rapturous breathings of the south winds low—
Such music as the flowers in Eden heard
Long, long ago.

Till in this quiet meadow where I stand
I felt the garments of the Spring trail past;
Then thrilled with joy of the exultant land,
I bloomed at last.

After we have read Tennyson's "Sweet and Low," one of the ablest students, in response to my order for a lullaby, pens these verses:

Sleep! the rose with heavy petals
In the garden dreams apart;
Mother's arms are close about thee,
Little Rose upon my Heart.

Dreamy, drowsy, long, and golden
Through the pines the moonbeams sway
O'er the leaves the shadows scamper,
Lonesome for thee, till the day.

All along the purple woodland
Elfin lights arise and shine;
Glowworms glimmer in the bushes—
Fireflies twinkle on the vine.

This is Heaven—love and twilight
And a lullaby apart;
Ah, to keep thee thus forever,
Little Rose, upon my Heart!

But why weary you with other examples of the success of a method so obvious? Of course, these specimens of student compositions are well above the average. Of course, in my class of a hundred, there are many whose verse is devoid of merit even where it manages to secure some correctness of rhythm and rhyme. But those who fail to produce smooth lines learn, nevertheless, from what is lacking in their own work just what to look for in the work of true poets; and the less able students listen with unfeigned delight to the verse of their more brilliant fellows, yielding it an attention they would never accord in the first instance to the verse of the remote masters. As they perceive, however, that the creations of these masters may be approached afar off in miniature in the writings of some of their own classmates, even the least competent students begin to take an interest in the masters themselves.

If it be objected that in this creative approach to literary appreciation I am teaching composition rather than literature, I reply that to make practical writers of my pupils is not at all my aim. I require original poems from them, not that they may become poets, but that they may learn to understand poems. I am not discouraged, therefore, when I read much doggerel and realize that those guilty of it are not qualified ever to produce anything intrinsically worth while in this kind. For I know that he who has composed even a maimed and halting sonnet as the result of real effort will ever after understand sonnets the better. So I forgive the Sophomore who, in struggling to compose a sonnet for my class in English III, presents one to me somewhat late, an effusion entitled "A Tardy Sonnet," beginning in Shakespearean wise:

When to the sessions of sweet English three
 My lagging footsteps slowly wend their way
 I sigh, to think of how, throughout each day
 For two long weeks (how long they seemed to me!)
 My pen has failed to answer to my plea,
 And how these words within my memory stay—
 "A sonnet, please"—Italian did he say?
 Alas! Alack! Words could not harsher be!
 And now, as mid-semester marks draw nigh,
 I understand that mine may not be high;

And so, although the Muse still grants no aid,
I try with zeal to turn aside hard fate,
And write a sonnet, with much effort made,
And hand that sonnet in, though it be late.

Sometimes, in talking with other college teachers of English who boast of their historical survey courses for Freshmen or Sophomores, I feel a sense of shame that I should be doing comparatively elementary work. I sigh to think of the lectures upon literary monuments and movements with which I might illumine these fresh young minds. But I am consoled whenever I talk with those who have had such lectures in college, for, unless they have brought to these a well-developed power to appreciate literature, I find that the lecturer's wisdom has been largely wasted. The time may soon come when the schools will do what I am doing with my one class of college Freshmen and Sophomores. That is the work, I believe, most feasible and valuable for them to undertake. Until then, however, it would seem to me desirable to give in college at least one course in pure appreciation even at the risk of being looked upon as a sentimental dilettante.

In conclusion, and to fortify my faith in my own method, let me offer the ballad of a Freshman, assigned to be written upon an item clipped from a recent newspaper. I give first the news-item which was selected as appropriate to ballad treatment out of a large number of clippings supplied by the class:

A traitor has just been shot. He was a little French lad belonging to one of the gymnastic societies which wear the tri-colored ribbons, a poor young fellow, who, in his infatuation, wanted to be a hero.

As the German column was passing along a wooded defile, he was caught and asked whether the French were about. He refused to give any information. Fifty yards further there was fire from the cover of the wood. The prisoner was asked in French if he had known that the enemy was in the forest, and he did not deny it.

He went with a firm step to a telegraph pole and stood against it, with a green vineyard at his back, and received the volley of a firing party with a proud smile on his face. Infatuated wretch! It was a pity to see such wasted courage.

Upon this item, copied evidently from a French journal, twenty-five students wrote ballads. By far the best follows:

German troops in the advance, headed for embattled France,
Trampled down the purpling vineyards with the wantonness of war;
A relentless Teuton host, fighting to make good their boast
To bring Europe to her knees and to rule forevermore.
Through the veins of danger-loving youth the lust for blood surged hot;
So they marched—when on the sunny air there rang a foeman's shot,
And the captain sharply eyed his boyish prisoner and swore.

“Did you know that ambush lay

Waiting for us on our way?

Speak, or die!” the captain cried.

But the boy still set his trembling lips with fearless taunting glance;

“Speak, or die!” the captain cried.

And he said, “I die—for France!”

Then the grizzled captain gazed at his prisoner, amazed,

And the soldiers stirred and murmured to each other in surprise.

“Speak and you shall live,” he said, but the boy still shook his head;

And he ordered that the spy be shot before his very eyes.

Yet the foolish, needless sacrifice of young blood touched his heart,

And he paused and called the boy to him and spoke to him apart:

“You are but a child, in truth.

And you need not die, mad youth.

Speak or die!” the captain cried.

But the boy tossed back his childish head with trembling, taunting glance.

“Speak or die!” the captain cried,

And he said, “I die—for France.”

Angered at his failure, then, turned the captain to his men,

As he roughly strode away and led the stubborn captive out;

And the men that stood around him seized the prisoner and bound him;

Then their leader called the Death Line forth with furious, lashing shout.

So the boy thrust back his shoulders as he faced that grim, black line,

Stood and faced them midst the green and purple of the ripening vine;

When the smoke had cleared away

There they saw him as he lay.

And, “The spy is dead!” they cried.

And his stiffening lips were set, but death masked his taunting glance.

“Ah, the spy is dead!” they cried.

So the boy had died—for France.